

The Plain Principles

A lucid summary of the ethics of the Baha'i Faith
based on The Hidden Words by Bahá'u'lláh
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Preface

Although the Bahá'í Faith was only founded in the nineteenth century, it is now one of the most rapidly-growing world religions. The Hidden Words—the preeminent ethical work of Bahá'u'lláh, the Faith's prophet-founder—is an excellent starting place for learning what moral teachings the Faith upholds. The book contains 153 short passages (originally, 71 in Arabic and 82 in Persian). Below, we have attempted to condense all 153 Hidden Words into 18 "Plain Principles" that capture the essence of the book—but please note that the Principles we have constructed bear no religious authority and are merely our own interpretations; we encourage your critical evaluation. References to the Hidden Words comprising each Principle are listed at the end.

On God

1. God—omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, time-transcendent, most-merciful, mighty and self-subsisting—created everything, including us, and is thereby beyond our ability to truly understand or describe, but has graciously revealed all we need to perfect ourselves through trust, faith, and effort.

On Reality

2. God created us through love and made us noble and capable of perfecting ourselves by recognizing our loving source of creation. We enliven our souls by fulfilling God's desire for us to reciprocate that love, a purpose for which we should strive immediately for God's love to most fruitfully enrich us. Within this framework, meaningful joy is closeness to God, and sorrow remoteness. Thus, while material possessions are not inherently harmful, we must not let them stifle our spirituality, which is ultimately most important. God's impression is eternal within us, making us likewise eternal, so instead of fearing death, we should cultivate spiritual virtues that bring us closer to God—both in this realm and in the next.

On Oneself

3. Fundamentally, we must answer God's call: to love God. To do this, we must recognize His¹ superiority and submit to Him, with mindful gratitude that God continually refreshes us with new spiritual inspiration. Prompted by love, we must earnestly abide by God's laws and teachings.
4. Concomitant with loving God is trusting God—trusting that He has already given us everything we need to abide by His Word and to therefore embody His attributes. We must neither question what God gives us nor take His bounty for granted. Rather, we should honor God by harnessing all of His blessings, using our God-given abilities to do so.
5. As God created us noble, He gave us the capacity to continuously discover His presence within ourselves; we must purify ourselves to reveal more of His attributes and draw nearer to Him.
6. We must endeavor to develop, promote, and uphold our spiritual principles to our utmost before death. Intellectuality absent of spirituality can never attain its fullest potential.
7. Among the virtues we must adorn ourselves with are courage, purity of heart, and patience. We must detach ourselves from the uncontrollable vicissitudes of physical life, eschewing vain or materialistic desires—turning our attention instead to our spiritual growth, appreciating the difficulties that cultivate it.
8. To love God and attain true peace, we must renounce our desires in favor of God's, so our mortal ego is replaced by the infinitude of God. We must follow God authentically, careful not to conflate His wisdom with our selfish desires. Thus, we must pursue meaningful hardship over meaningless comfort, and refrain from debasing ourselves, either by seeking fallible sources or valuing the ephemeral above God.
9. We must assess ourselves by our deeds, not words, focusing on embodying positive principles rather than moralizing about them.
10. We must be perceptive, intentional, coherent, and consistent; accordingly, we should not wish for that which God would not wish for us.
11. Instead of blindly following others, we must each use our free will to think critically about everything—including the principles discussed in this work—and to reflect daily upon our actions and decisions in relation to our spiritual development.
12. We must recognize God's presence and, in meditating upon His wisdom, aim to reflect His qualities to realize an everlasting and joyful peace.

¹"The Bahá'í teachings describe God as neither male nor female, although the limitations and conventions of our language and many others have led us to refer to Him in the masculine."

On Others

13. To acquire God's virtues, we must be radiant, generous, kind, and compassionate. Remembering our oneness, we must care for one another with a spirit of loving unity.

14. A society cannot sustainably flourish without justice. We must free our world from tyranny, and free our hearts from malice.

15. We must be humble and neither hold ourselves above others nor arrogantly misrepresent, think, or speak too highly of ourselves. Likewise, we must not speak degradingly of others.

16. We all come from the same Source. We must each eschew envy and hypocrisy, prefer others before ourselves, focus not on others' faults but our own, and neither attribute nor wish that which we would not want attributed to or wished upon us.

17. We must have discernment—guided by a sense of fairness free from prejudice and bias—especially when deciding the wholesomeness of what to consume and the character of whom to befriend.

18. We must be productive, engage in work, and contribute to society—motivated by the knowledge that sacrifice for God is a peerless honor that draws us nearer to Him. In our efforts, we must not let wealth inflate our egos, but instead care for the poor. Ultimately, we must rise to serve, conscious that service to humanity is service to God.

References

Principle 1: Arabic 3, 11–13, 20, 24, 51, 65–67, 70; Persian 29, 37, 48, 60–61, 63, 65, 67, 78

Principle 2: Arabic 3–14, 19, 22, 32, 34–35, 63; Persian 1, 3–4, 7–8, 10, 15–18, 20–21, 27, 29, 37–41, 44, 52–53, 62, 70, 72–73, 79, 82

Principle 3: Arabic 24, 32–34, 38–40, 42, 71; Persian 7, 11, 16–18, 20, 22, 32, 35, 46, 71, 77

Principle 4: Arabic 7–10, 11–12, 22, 32, 34, 37, 44, 48, 64, 70; Persian 1, 9–10, 13, 18, 21–22, 32–34, 38, 52, 70–71, 77–78, 80

Principle 5: Arabic 13, 58–61, 71; Persian 8, 11–12, 19, 26–27, 31, 33, 41, 44–46, 60, 68–69, 72, 78

Principle 6: Arabic 31, 41–43, 63; Persian 18, 22, 72

Principle 7: Arabic 1, 48, 52–56; Persian 4, 8, 11–12, 23, 35, 38, 42, 44–45, 47–48, 49–51, 53–55, 70–71, 74–75, 76, 79

Principle 8: Arabic 7–10, 13, 15–17, 19, 21, 23, 28, 38, 46–47, 49–51, 54–56, 62; Persian 1–2, 4, 10–14, 19–20, 22, 28–32, 34, 37–40, 43, 45, 48–49, 52, 61–62, 65, 68–69, 71–75, 77, 79

Principle 9: Arabic 28, 71; Persian 5, 24–25, 35–36, 69, 76

Principle 10: Arabic 18, 62–63, 70; Persian 2, 19, 23, 26, 29, 31, 45, 73

Principle 11: Arabic 2, 31, 46; Persian 9, 27–28, 30, 52, 71

Principle 12: Arabic 2, 33, 36; Persian 33, 78

Principle 13: Arabic 1, 68; Persian 38, 49, 61, 73, 82

Principle 14: Persian 42, 64

Principle 15: Arabic 25, 29; Persian 20, 23, 47, 49, 54, 66, 69

Principle 16: Arabic 26–29, 68; Persian 5–6, 20, 24–25, 42–44, 50, 54, 66, 69

Principle 17: Arabic 2, 69; Persian 3, 9–11, 36, 44, 56–58

Principle 18: Arabic 25, 30, 41, 43, 45, 50–51, 57, 71; Persian 3, 23, 49, 51, 54, 80–82